

## A SOLDIERS STORY

BY JAMES E. MARTIN, SR.

In September 1943, I was drafted into the Army. I went through Infantry Basic Training at Fort Custer, Mich. From there I went to Camp Howsie, Texas. I then went to Camp Skokie Valley, Glen View, Ill. I was really good at the Rifle Manual of Arms. We lived in tents in the middle of Soldiers Field for a while. It was a war show to sell war bonds.

I soon realized I would never get to go overseas. I was 18 and I wanted to get in combat. A notice came on the bulletin board that anyone who wanted to go to the infantry should sign up. About a week later, they called two of us out and we were transferred to Camp Shanks, N.Y. I found out P.O.E. meant port of embarkation. I knew we must be going to Europe. We crossed the Atlantic Ocean on a Liberty or Victory ship convoy. We were in the English Channel on Christmas 1944.

The Germans had broken through about the middle of December. It was called the Battle of Bulge. For some reason we were kept in the channel for a couple of days before going into Le Havre, France.

It wasn't until 50 years later on the History Channel that I found out that a ship before us was torpedoed by a German sub off the coast of France. It was called the S.S. Leopoldville. Seven hundred and sixty-three young men were killed by the explosion or died in the icy water. No others reached shore. What was left of 2,235 went back to England.

But we made it to France. When we went to shore we were called reinforcements. "Replacements", sounded too sinister. We were issued M-1 rifles and told we were going to the front. That was the first time since Camp Shanks that anyone told us where we were going.

We were loaded onto little cattle cars and taken somewhere in Belgium. Four of us were going to the infantry. I later found out it was the 104th Infantry Division. We were called Timberwolves. I found out later.

About two days into LeHavre, we were strafed by German planes. None of us was hurt or killed.

Now, as Paul Harvey would say, for the rest of the story. There were about six of us in a two-and-a-half-ton truck. They were called Deuce and a Half.

I was standing in the right front center corner and my buddy was to my left. The rest were sitting down. We had been together since Camp Shanks, and he was the only friend I had in the the world. His name was Charlie Boyden, and he lived in Honolulu.

We had just come through this little town, and I saw a three-wheeled motorcycle coming toward us. The roads were all hard gravel. When it got to about 50 feet from us, I saw the driver had a German helmet on and he was coming from the wrong direction. I could have leaned down and touched him. We made eye contact.

When he passed us, he lost control and hit what looked like a church cinderblock wall. He was going about 45 mph, and he probably died.

As I turned my head toward my friend to say, "Did you see that?" I didn't see the wire that was strung across the road. The next thing I knew I was lying in the truck, bleeding from my lip, face and ear. It didn't get my friend because I probably broke the wire. If I had turned straight ahead, I probably would have been killed.

Anyway, they took me back about a mile and dropped me off at an aid station. They patched me up and taped my ear in place and I rejoined my outfit, the next day. I still had nobody but my friend to talk to. None of the guys would talk to a new man. They all said a new man will get you killed.

That afternoon, they had a jeep and a half-track (half truck, half tank) going to this small town to see if the people would surrender. It was only about a half-mile from us.

They needed only one more man for the jeep. My buddy and I were sitting together by a tree. They took one look at my face and said to my buddy, "Let's go". I remember when he walked away, he still had creases in his pants. Strange how you remember little things like that.

He was the only man killed that day. Now, I was all alone. I'm not sure, but I think I cried that night. I was 19.

About three weeks later, I was transferred to the 3rd Armored Division, 83rd Recon. Battalion. By then, the Battle of the Bulge was about over. We didn't see too much action there.

When we left Camp Shanks, we had been issued wool pants and shirts and buckle-side combat boots and two pairs of longjohns, tops and bottoms. We found out if you wore one pair about three weeks, then swapped the outside pair with the inside pair, it wasn't too bad. Of course, we wore all four pieces at the same time. It is cold in January, February, March and April.

When we pulled back for a few days, we could make the swap and we would also turn them inside-out and have four fairly clean sides. We slept wherever we could because 90 percent of the houses were empty. Some of the houses still had long drapes on the windows, and we pulled them down and used them as covers to keep warm. You always slept fully clothed with your boots on because you never knew when the Germans would come and take the town back.

We were in convoys, first jeeps with wire breakers on the front bumpers about 5 feet high, then armored cars and half-tracks and then tanks. Hundreds of us rode in or on all the vehicles. Everybody took care of their weapons because you never knew when you would have to roll off a tank and fight.

I never was a hero. I didn't jump up and shoot 20 or 30 of the enemy or fall on a grenade like in the movies. I knew what soldiers looked like, with blood and frozen snow. I wanted to get back home someday. I was neither a hero nor a coward,



just an average guy.

I mentioned the drapes, but one time we had to sleep in a barn. There were about 20 bodies in there, all dead, and about four or five of us. The next barn was about 40 yards away. The Germans were shelling the other barn. All I could hear were babies crying and crying. The Germans finally stopped and moved out. I couldn't hear the crying anymore.

When dawn broke, we worked our way over to the other barn. The two barns were separated by a wall about 4 feet thick and 10 feet high. What we thought were babies crying were little lambs. They had all been killed by shell fire.

Our next town was a milestone. We saw the road signs: Nordhausen. I never realized how that word would haunt me to this day. We were nearing the town, maybe about a mile or so away, when we started to smell this stange odor. If you ever burned a fingernail or if your dentist's drill gets too hot, you get this strange odor from your tooth. It's an odor you will never forget.

As we got to the town, we found out what it was. There were hundreds of naked bodies, all burned and melted together. They all looked alike. You couldn't tell if they were male or female. They had been worked to death and then burned. They were all inside and outside of these big barns. Could've been thousands of bodies.

I saw another building not too far away. Another guy was behind me. As we got to the building, we saw a big lock on the door. Out of nowhere, an old, skinny man came up and produced a key. He stood back and I walked in first.

It seems to me the room was 50 by 50 square, more or less. (Remember, I'm going back 62 years.) The first thing I saw was hundreds or thousands of lanterns hanging everywhere. In the middle of the room were these big pulley wheels and a lot of thick cables. I knew they had to be elevator cables. We looked down the deep hole and couldn't see anything but darkness. We were soldiers, but we were 19.

The next thing I did was to light a lantern and drop it down the hole. It fell a long way before it went out. After about two or three seconds, we heard a little clink. I told our sergeant and he told Lt. Doherty. It was a V2 rocket assembly plant.

Not too long after that, we moved to Sangerhausen. The name Nordhausen still haunts me today. I've seen many more atrocities after that, but that was the first. I wasn't a kid anymore. I believe that day I became a man.

About May 1, while spending the night in the barn next to the little lambs, the only things we could find to cover up with were hundreds of slit-open burlap bags. You know what burlap smells like.

That brings us to the town of Rosla. We had been pulled back out of combat. We got showers and new underwear, and we felt fine. About 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning, we started to itch. That happened every night after we got warm. The Army gave us some blue stuff, but every night the itch would come back.

In Germany they had these big metal bathtubs out back. Three of us went to the motor pool and we each carried back two five-gallon cans of high-octane gasoline. I think we made two trips, about 50 to 60 gallons all together. I stripped naked. I don't remember if I held my nose or ears, but I got in. My buddies made sure I was completely submerged for about 30 seconds.

I stood up and my eyelids and lips were coming off. I probably lost other skin too. Gasline dries fast. I don't remember how many others got in, but some did. I managed to get other longjohns. But, I killed the "scabies", I got from the burlap bags. No more itches.

To my knowledge, I was the first soldier in Europe - or anywhere else, as far as I know - to take a gasoline bath.

We were training to go to Japan to finish the war there because the war in Germany ended on Mother's Day, May 8, 1945.

I was lucky enough to get a job driving a jeep with a sergeant on security patrol. We had to protect the German civilians from the Czechs, Austrians and Poles. We came into this little town and all the people came running out and telling us that the burgermeister (mayor) had been shot.

When we went into his office, we could see that he had been shot through the forehead, and the back of his head was gone. We went out back and got into a running gun battle, and I was shot through the left leg. But, through life, I've been hurt worse than that. For years, I would dig little bone chips out of the bottom of my foot. The bullet must have chipped the bone. I was in a hospital in Wurtzburg, Germany, for 31 days. I received 187 shots of penicillin.

General Douglas McArthur formally accepted Japan's surrender on September 2, 1945, ending the war on my birthday. I was 20 years old.